

**Senate Select Committee on School Safety Hearing on
“Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Discrimination and School Safety”
Plummer Park- Fiesta Hall, West Hollywood
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I. Adolescent Sexual Orientation and Health Risk

Research indicates that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adolescents are at higher risk than their heterosexual peers for some of the most compromising challenges that adolescents face today: substance use and abuse, violence and victimization, and suicide.

Substance Use and Abuse

A study using the 1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) shows that LGB-identified youth are more likely to begin to use marijuana and alcohol at younger ages, to have higher lifetime rates of crack/cocaine use, and to report more recent use of tobacco than their peers (1). Data from a national study (the “Add Health” Study) indicate that youth reporting romantic attractions to the same sex are more likely than their peers to abuse alcohol (2).

Violence and Victimization

Several recent studies have examined associations between adolescent sexual self-identity or same-sex sexual behavior and experiences of violence. Data from the 1995 Vermont YRBS indicate that among young men, same-sex sexual behavior is associated with more frequent reports of threats of physical violence, threats or injuries with a weapon at school, and fights that resulted in a need for medical attention (3). Students in the 1995 Massachusetts YRBS who identified themselves as LGB reported higher frequencies of having been threatened with a weapon at school, fighting, and injuries from fighting that required medical attention (1). Finally, data from the Add Health Study show that youth who report same-sex romantic attractions are more likely than their peers to experience extreme forms of violence and to witness violence (4).

Suicide

One of the most widely known risks for LGBT youth is suicide. Studies of LGB youth consistently indicate that they are at higher risk for emotional distress (depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem; 2, 5) than their heterosexual peers. This emotional distress is closely linked to thinking about and attempting suicide (6-12; for comparison statistics to U.S. adolescents see 13, 14). Recent population-based studies have affirmed these reports (2).

Why are LGBT adolescents at risk?

During adolescence, dealing with emerging sexuality becomes a fundamental developmental task (15). The usual difficulties associated with this developmental process are likely to be exacerbated for LGBT youth; they must simultaneously negotiate the challenges of adolescence with the cultural stigma of homosexuality (16). As is the case for all at-risk youth, the important sources of support in their lives—family, friends, church, and school—are critically important for their healthy development.

II. Adolescent Gender Conformity and Health Risk

Developmentally, adolescence is a period during which young people learn about social and cultural attitudes regarding gender. It is a time when the boundaries of gender expression are strict, and the social regulation of gendered behavior is strictly enforced by peers (15, 17, 18).

In recent years much attention has been focused on documenting and explaining the high rates of risk among LGBT youth. One key factor believed to be associated with this risk is atypical gender expression, or gender nonconformity. Some have argued that gender non-conformity among LGBT may be a “root cause” of the risk that they experience (19). While this is a plausible hypothesis, little direct evidence is available to support it. Regardless, gender nonconformity is not, however, exclusive to LGBT adolescents. Recent research based on national data indicates that boys who have same-sex relationships may be less masculine than other boys, but there were no differences based on masculinity / femininity for girls (20). These results help to explain the common perception that gay male adolescents experience more harassment and discrimination in the school environment than lesbian adolescents (17).

While there is no existing population-based research that indicates that gender nonconformity is associated with risk for victimization and harassment, the anecdotal and in-depth qualitative evidence strongly indicates that gender nonconforming youth – both LGBT and heterosexual – are at risk in the school environment (17).

III. Adolescent Sexual Orientation, Gender Conformity, and the School Environment: Promising Practices

The school environment is important not only in the development of academic and occupational skills, but also the personal and social skills that shape the first 20 years of life. In addition to compromised emotional health and increased risk behavior, LGBT youth have been shown to be at risk for compromised educational outcomes, including poor academic performance, negative school attitudes, and depressed educational expectations (21). A growing body of knowledge has established that many of the problems of LGBT youth stem directly from their education and schooling experiences.

Risk at School

The use and abuse of substances is linked to the lives of LGBT youth at school. A study based on the 1995 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) showed that male youth who engage in same-sex sexual behaviors are more likely than other sexually active males to smoke cigarettes, use tobacco, drink alcohol, and use marijuana at school (3, 22, 23), and to experience threats or injuries with a weapon at school (3). Students in the 1995 Massachusetts YRBS who identified themselves as LGB reported higher frequencies of having been threatened with a weapon at school (1).

Given that schools are meant to provide education for all youth, why are they sometimes hostile environments for LGBT youth? In many high schools, verbal abuse, graffiti, and other antigay activities permeate everyday relations among students (24). A survey of high school students

conducted by the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth revealed that 97.5 percent of 398 respondents reported hearing homophobic remarks at school; 49 percent of the students reported hearing such comments frequently (25). This pervasive homophobia in the school setting is often expressed not only by fellow students, but at times by teachers as well (17).

While many districts, schools, and individual administrators and teachers are proactive in assuring that the school environment is free from harassment and discrimination, it remains that many schools and school personnel:

- have limited awareness of or are not prepared or trained to understand and manage these issues,
- do not take the harassment or victimization seriously, even for students for whom harassment and victimization experiences are pervasive,
- express the belief that victims "cause" their own victimization, and thereby
- do not support victimized youth (17).

What can make a difference in school environments?

In a national study of 7th-12th graders, sexual minority youth with positive feelings about their teachers were significantly less likely than their peers to experience school troubles (21). Thus, teachers can play an important role in creating supportive school environments where all youth can grow and learn. Training and support are needed to provide teachers and other school personnel with the knowledge and skills to support LGBT youth in school settings.

During the past 10 years (and particularly in the last 5 years), schools across the country have been developing programs and policies that can help prevent and intervene when students are harassed or victimized based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or identity. These efforts have included the development and implementation of:

- nondiscrimination and harassment policies that specifically include actual or perceived sexual orientation or identity,
- training for school personnel (including administrators, teachers, custodial and security staff) on identifying and responding to victimization and harassment, at times including specific attention to issues of sexual identity and orientation,
- programs designed to increase the understanding and awareness of nondiscrimination and harassment policies by both school personnel and students, and
- programs and activities that actively promote a supportive school environment for sexual minority youth, including attention to such issues in the curriculum and the creation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

Recent research on GSAs indicates that they may be a particularly effective way to engage students in promoting tolerance and acceptance within the school environment (17, 26, 27). A recent comprehensive study of the *Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students* revealed that each element of the Program (GSAs, teacher training, and inclusive school policies) contributed to school environments characterized by less harassment and more feelings of safety. Further, GSAs had the strongest effect with high school boys (28). Similarly, elements of the safe schools program were demonstrated to have a positive effect on the overall diversity climate at schools (29). This research demonstrates that through promoting tolerance and

acceptance in schools, GSAs support positive school climate across a wide range of issues and experiences.

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